

1980: Poland mass strikes - Henri Simon



Henri Simon's account of the successful strike wave which swept Poland in the summer of 1980 when the government raised the price of meat.

A NEW WORLD: FROM MEAT PRICES TO DIRECT DEMOCRACY

July 1980: Spontaneous Strikes Run Rampant Everywhere 1

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The government's plan was clear; it would avoid a generalized explosion by settling the problems one by one, keeping the workers divided. This plan was feasible because for some time there had been some autonomy in enterprise management. But if the government thus effectively avoided direct political attack and sheltered itself a bit, it furthered the strike because each factory took up the struggle won next door. In actual fact, these tactics resulted in the decentralization of decision-making - not only on the part of management, but also on the workers' side; the already discredited official unions were accustomed only to transmit decisions from above, not to negotiate working conditions in the factory; this situation undoubtedly encouraged the spontaneous appearance of discussion groups and associations for collective decision-making. By July 15, fifty strikes had already broken out or were still going on. They often lasted only a few days; that was enough to make management give in. In some cases, the mere threat of a strike was sufficient. New elements were already visible: the desire to guarantee the demands that were already granted without having constantly to begin the struggle all over again; the continued existence of rank-and-file committees after



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the struggle had ended - the committees which the rank-and-file had elected or approved and which had negotiated directly with management over the head of the official union.

By this time, things had already gone much further, even though it appeared that the authorities had succeeded in extinguishing the incipient conflagration. On July 17, the city of Lublin (population, 300,000, 100 kilometers from the USSR) was completely paralyzed; railway workers had discovered that a train labelled "fish" was filled with meat and headed for the Soviet Union; they shut down rail traffic by leaving trains and engines on the tracks.

Everything was on strike: buses, bread and milk delivery, nursing, construction, water service; the meat would have to be distributed to the population. The government sent Jagielski, deputy Prime Minister; the Party issued an official summons to return to work.

Everything ended two days later, but the fact remained that an entire city organized itself to go on strike; the demands did not remain merely economic. A desire to assure the gains already won led to an attempt to set up permanent organs of defence. Fifteen days later, following procedures they themselves set up, the Lublin railway workers began electing union representatives directly and

other Lublin workers followed their lead.

Working-class Consciousness is Aroused

Such are the economic, social, political and ideological conditions which moulded these workers' collective consciousness. This collective consciousness would accelerate the pace of subsequent struggles and permit new organizational structures to establish themselves. It was not the KOR and the handful of "free unionists" which precipitated the struggle and turned it into the tidal wave which effectively brought down the entire regime. It was rather the ground swell which opened the way for new structures among which the unions were one of the key elements. The system's reformers used the ground swell as the basis for their organizational project. The end of the strike in Lublin did not end strikes elsewhere: strikes continued to run rampant through the first days of August. The government seemed confident that its strategy of partial concessions would be successful, but its weakness was shown by the extent to which concessions granted in one place were immediately taken up elsewhere. The underground groups themselves acknowledged that they played a very small part in the outbreak and persistence of the wave of strikes. But now, suddenly, their organizational project was transformed from a far-off ideal into a reality close at hand, especially since their working class contacts were carried to the forefront by the surge of the movement and hundreds of workers, previously unknown, were turning toward them. Only a member of an elitist and hierarchical organization could believe that all this energy could result from the activity of a tiny minority and that if a few individuals - supposedly leaders - were eliminated, the movement would be abruptly broken. The government's attempt to do this had the opposite effect from the one expected; for the rank-and-file as well as the Western mass media (which came looking only for leaders), the repression which now descended gave credibility to the idea that the underground groups had played and were able to play a useful role. In fact, the repression helped the union establish itself in the function it had defined for itself from the beginning. Toward the end of August, the Party found it needed to initiate a new and different approach because its policy of conciliation had brought meagre results.

After more than six weeks, the strikes continued; arresting the militants most committed to the "free trade union movement" was clearly not a means to end the strikes. Nevertheless, this is what the authorities attempted.

August 15 - 31, Two Crucial Weeks;

Gdansk: The Institutionalization of the Rank-and-File Movement

The first repressive measure seems to have taken place in Warsaw on Monday, August 11; the police detained and held for nine hours Marek Glessman, "leader" of the garbage collectors' strike. In Gdansk on August 13, the new policy became more explicit when three

Lenin Shipyard workers who were connected with the underground independent union were fired (among them were Anna Walentynowicz and Nowicki). Prior to this, the Tri-city

[Gdansk, Sopot and Gdynia) had largely remained outside the struggle but now the general strike spread like wildfire and was concentrated around the Lenin Shipyards. If the activity of militants was apparent in the summons to the struggles at the shipyards, the speed with which things moved in the shipyards themselves and then in all enterprises in Gdansk demonstrated yet again workers' spontaneity and the rapid transformation of collective working class consciousness. Last-minute concessions at the shipyards no longer stopped anything. A strike committee was formed by some ten militants [among them, Lech Walesa who had climbed over the wall as soon as he heard news about the strike because "the situation was ripe and he should be at the shipyards") who were quickly joined by one hundred delegates designated by different shipyard departments. The demands no longer had any connection with what had unleashed the strike - or rather, they had a profound connection, being a generalization of what was inherent in the particular repressive event which had ignited the powder barrel: along with economic demands, there was a call for free unions, access to the media, repeal of all repressive measures and an end to certain ruling class privileges.

The government tried to stem the rising tide with the weak means available at the moment; with one hand, settlements at individual enterprises; covert repression with the other. On August 17, twenty-four enterprises in the region were on strike; on August 18, there were 180

in a 100-kilometer area around Gdansk. The strike committee at the shipyards transformed itself into an inter-factory committee, the MKS, which was composed of two delegates from each factory.

This committee controlled the entire region and resolved transportation and food distribution problems. Although Gierek proclaimed on August 18 that "the only just path is one of dialogue and compromise" the government ignored the MKS; its delegated official, Pyka, stated he could meet only with representatives from individual factories; at the same time, on August 20, twenty KOR members were arrested. In Szczecin, the situation was the same as in Gdansk. MKS committees were set up in other industrial regions, notably in the Silesian mines. A general strike spread throughout Poland without anyone having issued a call for one; rank-and-file committees sprang up on their own and managed everyday activities in ever-larger geographical sectors. The government had to change its policy. It apparently was influenced by two considerations whose relative importance remains unclear: lower echelons of the Party (including certain security forces) went over to the strike and the army chiefs did not want to "restore order" because they lacked confidence in their troops.

One deputy Prime Minister, Jagielski, finally came for discussions with the Gdansk MKS

while his counterpart, Barcikowski, negotiated with the Szczecin MKS. The government seemed to capitulate, and seemed to go on capitulating, more or less, until the signing of the

"Gdansk accords" and the call to resume work on September 1, issued by the MKS

representative, Lech Walesa. This all took place amidst appeals for moderation circulated by the Church, the KOR and by Walesa himself: Gdansk was to be an exemplary island in a Poland hard at work, a safety valve where responsible people who had the situation well under control set up structures appropriate to a modern capitalist Poland. Why has there been so much attention given to the Gdansk accords and so little to those of Szczecin which were signed at about the same time and had the same provisions? At this time, the government was possibly attempting a defensive strategy to try to limit the accords geographically, just as it had earlier tried, unsuccessfully, to restrict them to individual enterprises. The concentration on what happened in Gdansk was due not only to the region's economic importance and the strength of the strike: during the days of strikes and negotiations, a familiar tactic evolved

which was aimed at the resistance movement itself, namely at the workers and

their will to resist.

On the one hand, in Gdansk, an inter-factory strike committee held power in a portion of national territory. On the other hand, and this is the more important aspect, the negotiations in Gdansk were not discussions between strikers and the authorities, but a meeting of reformists, some of them Party members, the others connected with the political opposition or with the working class rank-and-file - all of them serving as experts seeking a satisfactory solution in order to "save the Polish nation," namely to make the workers labour "properly" in order to straighten out the capitalist economy. In describing these discussions among experts, Jadwiga Staniszkis spoke of a relaxed atmosphere and added: "One of the reasons was that the experts on both sides were more or less from the same world in the capital. In a way, if one considered only their political approach, their positions could have been reversed." It was not easy to impose this "solution" on the workers, and, in spite of appeals, strikes were still spreading on Wednesday, August 27, especially in the industrial region of the South. This made it urgent to come up with a statement which would save face for the leaders on both sides. On the workers' side, a leadership, the Presidium, made up largely of underground militants who were co-opted at the beginning of the strike, quickly detached itself from the rank-and-file. Many points in the negotiations were imposed either by the experts (underground political militants or economists whose "services" had been accepted) or by Walesa himself, who discussed matters privately with Jagielski. The democracy practiced by those who came, whether from near or far, to "organize the workers" had no relation to the democratic activities of the workers. But this took place in the euphoria of victory. On the governments side too, there were reservations: wouldn't these new structures sweep away a lot of the hard-won posts that many still wanted to defend by force? But those days were past and since the ground swell had shaken up the upper echelons of the Party as well as the economic experts, there was no other alternative but to ride the wave and try to save the essential: class domination. In fact, the Gdansk accords served a two-fold purpose. On the one hand, they put an end to the strikes which threatened to spread; on the other, they attempted to provide a structure which was simultaneously comprehensive, indefinite and efficient, into which the rank-and-file movement could be channelled.

September 1980: Two Bureaucracies Against the Rank-and-File

On Sunday, August 31, Lech Walesa announced not only to all workers in the

Gdansk region but to all Polish workers: "The strike is over. We did not get everything we wanted, but we did get all that was possible in the current situation. We will win the rest later because we now have the essential: the right to strike and independent unions." This borders on involuntary * humour: Polish workers had been asserting their right to strike for a long time; and since July they had been exercising their right to independently organize and put forward their own demands. But now that work was resumed in Gdansk, they had to renounce their own demands and adopt the union's, they had to submerge their own rank-and-file organizations in hierarchical structures which issued orders and precise instructions for action; they had to go back to work and again - labour for the prosperity of a system in which they once more ? counted for little. Their autonomous activity, their abundant originality, the direct defence of their own interests, all this - in terms of the intentions of the government and the "free" union - should serve for nothing more than to institute reforms which soften the excessively brutal edges of exploitation. The goal of the reforms was to eliminate revolutionary tendencies in the movement and relegate them to the level of "provocations,"

and to enjoy the grandiose hollow words of politicians and the various promises of Party leaders. In actual fact, the accords did not serve that function, they did not succeed in eliminating all the revolutionary thrust of the movement. But that was the objective content

of the accords. As for the original demands of the strike, they were put to one side: pay raises would not be immediate, only gradual, according to industrial sector and at the discretion of the government. There would be no sliding scale but merely an adjustment hinging on the cost of basic necessities. As for food provisions, and meat supplies in particular, this all remained in the dark.

At the end of August a journalist for Le Monde reported that: "The situation is uncertain enough for the MKS Presidium members to worry that an uncontrolled rank-and-file movement might arise, have unpredictable consequences and jeopardize such an important victory." September 1980 was the month of great equivocation when the majority of workers, in the euphoria over the strength of the workers' movement which had dominated everything else for the past two months, seemed to be satisfied with the vague words which they thought contained their conception of protest and demands, whereas they contained the conceptions of the democratic bourgeoisie. These same workers seemed to have confidence in men who, because of their perseverance in the ranks of the

underground opposition during the long years of repression, were above the slightest suspicion; they were unaware that it is the office that makes the man and that even the most honest among them cannot escape the pitfalls of union functions under capital. They were also unaware that many of these new leaders had the same elitist conceptions as the leaders of the system they were fighting. Walesa, for example, later stated: "I have always been the ringleader, like the billy-goat that leads the flock, like the ox that leads the herd. People need that ox, that billy-goat, otherwise the herd goes on its own, here and there, wherever there is some grass to eat, and nobody follows the right road. A flock without an animal that leads is a senseless thing without a future."

Jadwiga Staniszkis commented about Walesa that he "has an amazing talent for manipulating the masses."

Kuron, pre-eminent among the experts and one of the KOR leaders who was hired right away by the new Solidarity union, was mistaken when he said: "The unions ought to be partners in the administration and protectors of the workers." Other Solidarity leaders already saw the union's role as participating in economic decision-making at the state as well as the factory level. They obviously ran up against the omnipotent power of capital and of the "Party bourgeoisie" but this is precisely the direction of capital's history. In difficult periods, capital resorts to appeals for national unity and, for the required time, "calls on the working men"

(namely on their licensed organizations] to help manage the crisis and to re-establish the conditions of "normal" exploitation. Kuron was mistaken because he tried to see the role of the new unions in terms of the role of unions in the Western branch of capital. The role of the old unions in the Eastern branch was significantly different. Whereas in the West, the role of unions is to mediate, in the East unions are a political instrument and cannot play this role—

the union leaders themselves being members of the capitalist class. The role of the new unions in the Eastern branch seems quite contradictory. During a transitional period, namely, as long as the workers' movement is on the offensive, they tend to function like unions in the Western branch. But in the political system of the Russian zone, it is impossible to maintain this function; they can only be transformed into instruments of the capitalist class. This is why nothing could be stabilized; either the political system would have to be transformed, or else the working class struggle would continue its autonomous

movement and increasingly detach itself from the union which was becoming a cog of the system. Implacable logic would lead Solidarity to become an instrument ever more removed from the rank- and-file and from working class interests. This evolution would lead it first to demand and later to try to promote, for its own purposes, the only political transformation—democratization—

which would allow it to perform fully the function which the development of capital assigns to it.

Work was resumed in both Gdansk and Szczecin on Monday, September 1, and the two MKS

committees were converted into branches of Solidarity. But just as the Gdansk MKS had served as model, the Gdansk local became, first in practice, then legally, a sort of superior body. Just as the Gdansk Presidium and the experts had formed a sort of central committee during the strike and later became the administration of the Gdansk union, so Walesa, the

"natural leader," became simply the leader. During the first half of September, it was quite easy to get acceptance of the Gdansk accords and of the transformation of MKS locals into branches of Solidarity. This was accepted in the Silesian mines on Wednesday, September 3.

But there were already signs of discord. The aviation factory in Mielec resumed its strike on Thursday, September 4, and added twenty-three demands to the twenty-one points of Gdansk, including the firing of several upper echelon administrators; in the Tarnobrzeg sulphur mines, the working conditions took precedence over general conditions; elsewhere, workers demanded: the firing of a local Party chief; the cessation of the teamwork system currently practiced in the mines; the five-day week, etc.

Although these conflicts may appear to be the tail end of the strikes of July and August, they nonetheless anticipate what would take place later and, in particular, they indicate that the rank-and-file movement was guarding its autonomy. The apparent calm made the authorities hopeful that everything was being normalized in the newly established structures, each protagonist hoping to utilize circumstances in order to nibble away at the other's power. In fact, almost the entire work force joined the ranks of Solidarity; this emptied the official unions of all their constituents, compelling union bureaucrats to find other jobs.

By the end of September 1980, Solidarity could claim to represent 90% of the workers; it had its own national structure (a permanent committee of co-ordination) and regional branches which, in principle, were autonomous. On Tuesday, September 16, the Gdansk branch of Solidarity issued an edict warning against wildcat strikes. For their part, the reformist bureaucracy in the Party set about eliminating the obstacles to the implementation of the "Gdansk program;"

Gierek was replaced by Kania; expulsions and power struggles ` would continue for a long time to come. The newly promoted officials endeavoured to reassure both the Russians and the West, so as to protect their posts and also to procure without delay the vital supplies and the credits needed to avoid strangulation of an economy heavily dependent on foreign exchange. In this area, underneath the propaganda and posturing, Kania found nothing but good will. For the time being, all were ready to come to Poland's "aid" - simultaneously brandishing self-serving offers of assistance along with threats of force, as in every capitalist context - to "aid" Poland in surmounting this obstacle, especially now since the accords and the situation seemed to guarantee that things were heading toward "normalization." Gdansk fulfilled its promises: within a month, Solidarity had become an instrument "with which discussions are possible," as Kania declared and, as Walesa would say later, Kania is "a man with whom discussions are possible."

OCRed for libcom.org by Linda Towlson



1. This article is an extract from Henri Simon's excellent book, Poland 1980-82